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ABSTRACT

Women's education in 16th and 17th century England is discussed. Prior to the 16th century, education for women had a religious focus. That picture was changed by three 16th century events: the rise of humanism, the Protestant Reformation, and the reign of Elizabeth I. Humanists recommended that women be given advanced education. Many Protestant reformers insisted on compulsory schooling for boys and girls. Elizabeth I fostered the scholarly values of both these groups. The idea of a broad classical education for upperclass women became an accepted idea. In addition, with the establishment of Protestantism in England in 1534, convent and church schools were closed and replaced with privately endowed grammar schools. By the 17th century, however, this grass roots schooling came into the hands of the Puritans. One effect was the dissemination of Protestant values, resulting in more limitations placed on all women. The Elizabethan ideal of a rich classical education for upperclass women was supplanted by an ideal of women in all classes becoming literate enough to read the Bible for themselves and perhaps to teach it to their children. The picture that emerges, therefore, of female education in 17th century England is a dismal one. A three page list of references concludes the report. (RM)

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TRENDS IN FEMALE SCHOOLING AND LITERACY: ENGLAND, 1500 - 1700

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TRENDS IN FEMALE SCHOOLING AND LITERACY: ENGLAND, 1500 - 1700

The greatly accelerating interest of the past two decades in historical information about women should have particular relevance for educators: For many centuries, when females were locked out of other arenas because of their gender, it seems that opportunities often remained available for them to engage in at least the rudiments of reading--as learners and as teachers. Beyond that core of literacy, the nature and extent of women's participation in educational endeavors varied considerably from era to era and from place to place. The variations were often determined by birth and wealth as well as by a range of cultural and political factors that affected how females as a group were viewed and were able to function. This paper will focus on two centuries in England and discuss some of the trends in female education during that time.

The 16th and 17th centuries in England saw a culmination of the educational goals and practices of the previous millenium. At the same time, those years contained the seeds of the educational practices of the succeeding centuries (Bowen, 1975, p. 435) and thus should be useful for understanding some of the subsequent trends in female education, not only in England, but in places around the world that felt the influence of England.

We will start by reviewing the opportunities for female education in England before the 16th century and then survey some of the changes and forces for change in the two centuries under discussion.

Female Schooling in England Prior to 1500

For about a thousand years in England, from the start of Christianity there in the late 6th century through the 15th century, at least some members of all classes of society were taught to read. While in those years literacy was the prime tool for religious and learned scholarship, it was also a very pragmatic instrument for personal communication and for the other written necessities of economic and social functioning, including household and estate record-keeping. (Clanchy, p. 198) In the many years that women were empowered with household and ecclesiastical responsibilities--which included much of the Middle Ages--reading and writing, on some level, was needed by them as well as by men.

There is as yet no precise evidence on the extent of literacy, but it appears that youngsters from the upper social levels--the nobility and the gentry--were either taught at home by their mothers, tutors, or governesses or were sent to other upper-class households where such tutoring took place. Children from less privileged groups--the offspring of farmers, craftsmen, tradesmen, for example--were taught in a variety of school and tutoring settings.

One setting was the schola cantorum or singing school attached to a church or monastery where, in addition to songs and hymns, the students were taught reading and Latin in order to take part in church services.

Another type of school, the chantry schools, were popular in the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries. Chantries were chapels that were endowed by individuals, groups, or guilds to house priests who were hired for the primary purpose of chanting daily masses for the souls of specific departed persons. A secondary responsibility of such priests grew to be the schooling of children in the area and chantry schools became commonplace.

In addition to endowing chantries, which were religious in context, the various trade, craft, merchant, and social guilds established lay schools whose function was to teach the children and apprentices of guild members as well as other, often poor, children for free. There are, too, records of hospitals and alms-houses (or almonries) that provided schooling facilities.

Schooling could also be obtained from private teachers, either from itinerants or from those who added to their incomes by tutoring neighborhood children. Shopkeepers, weavers, and tailors, for example, are mentioned as providing reading and other instruction in their own homes or establishments.

The schooling mentioned so far dealt, for the most part, with the early levels of instruction and corresponded to the first tier of what had evolved, by the start of the 16th century, into a three-tier system. First, there was the primary or "petty" level for simple reading and writing English, for singing, and for arithmetic. On the second tier, apparently as early as the 12th century (Bowen, p. 106) were more advanced grammar, Latin, or secondary schools. Lastly, by the end of the 12th century, starting with the founding of Oxford, there were colleges and universities for advnaced scholarship.

All of those three tiers of education were available to boys and men; only the first was generally available to females, with availability for the less privileged classes determined by local circumstances. There is evidence that at least by the end of the 14th century, the idea of girls attending the same schools as boys was an accepted concept: Henry IV's statute of 1406, essentially designed to permit greater latitude to peasants who wished to raise their status, provided "that every man or woman, of what estate or condition that he be, shall be free to set their son or daughter to take learning at any manner of school that pleaseth them within the realm." (Cremin, p. 169) While there was no discrimination by sex in this instance--mothers as well as fathers were empowered--the numbers of children, both boys and girls who took advantage of this opportunity for formal schooling were small (Bowen 1981, p. 14).

Yet, there were individual women who attained notably advanced levels of scholarship. Such women--though few in number they were not uncommon--were almost uniformly from privileged households. They acquired their learning by means of private teachers or family members or were taught in convents. (See Labalme (1980) and Bridenthal and Koonz (1977) for recent discussions of the rich scholarship and other attainments many such high-born women achieved throughout the centuries.)

Women in convents had numerous opportunities for both learning and teaching. Nuns were generally members of the upper classes who, for a variety of reasons, entered or were entered by their families into the monastic life. During medieval times, considerable numbers of them reached lofty levels of scholarship as well as substantial ecclesiastical power.

Despite their opportunities to achieve, however, there was an everpresent prejudice against women's real attainments, a prejudice of which all were well aware. Only one of many examples was the request by the nun of Barking (c. 1163) that her translation into French of a biography of Edward the Confessor be not despised because a woman did it. (Clanchy, p. 216).

Not only did nuns learn, but they taught. Convents traditionally provided petty schools and classes, conducted for both boys and girls. Stock (p. 69) states that the convent schools were

"almost the only source of education for lower class girls." Moreover, nuns within the convents taught each other. Certainly, the religious content that imbued their lives was zealously shared. The particulars of that content, however, were determined by the circumstances of each convent's leadership as well as by the general ecclesiastical climate of the era. Thus, in some situations, nuns were able to become scribes of the first rank--among the most beautiful medieval manuscripts were those made by nuns (Balmuth, p. 46). On the other hand, Power points out that by Chaucer's time (late 14th century) "the early tradition of learning had died out--many nuns could hardly understand the Latin in which their services were written" (p. 81). *

On the outside of convents, as mothers, governesses, and private teachers, women were called upon to teach as the need arose. Mother often played a decided role not only by actually providing instruction to the extent of their own abilities, but also by encouraging their children's education (Clanchy, pp. 152, 196; Watson, 1902, pp. 3 - 4). Moreover, in some small

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*This has been attributed to the rise of the universities in the late 12th century, which b ecame centers of the highest scholarship and from which women were excluded - in contrast to when advanced medieval scholarship resided in monastic orders, to which nuns might have access.)

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towns and villages, when it was hard to find qualified men to teach the primary levels, women often did so.

In sum, it appears that, in England, prior to the 16th century, the family and community structures of the localized preindustrial society of those many years allowed for a wide range of activities in which women could quite easily participate, though to a lesser extent than men. For poorer women, that participation included teaching and learning to read at the early levels when males of similar station did. For high-born and for convent-situated women, a certain amount of advanced religious and advanced secular learning was also available.

That picture was changed by events of the 16th century.

Sixteenth Century Humanism in England

The 16th century in England started with the era of humanism--roughly, the forty years between 1500 and 1540--was followed mid-century by the twenty years of the Protestant Revolt or Reformation, and ended with forty years of the reign of Elizabeth I.

Humanism, the intellectual movement of fourteenth and fifteenth century Italy associated with the Renaissance, swept through Western Europe and inspired an international group of influential scholars to open up a world of classical Greek and Roman literature for intensive study. Their goal was to uplift

human conduct and society by examining and then teaching the ruling classes how to live in accordance with the instructions of the great writers of antiquity.

In contrast to the purely religious scholasticism that preceded them, the humanists advocated a liberalizing of thought and attitude, as well as the emphasis on classical Greek and Latin scholarship mentioned above. Most pertinent for our discussion was the humanists' urging that the Scriptures be read in the vernacular rather than solely in Latin, and their strong recommendation that women be given advanced education. Such humanists as Leonardo Bruni of Italy (c.1370-1444) and Juan Luis Vives (1492-1540) of Spain were especially clear in the advocacy of women's learning.

In England, among the most prominent proponents of humanism in the early 16th century were Sir Thomas More (1478 - 1535), closely allied with Desiderius Erasmus of Holland (1467 - 1536), and Sir Thomas Elyot (1490 - 1546). Thomas More is held responsible for a great advance in the 16th century in the education of upperclass English women--in such subjects as classical literature, philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, physics, logic, and rhetoric. More himself educated a number of young women, including his three daughters, in his own home, and their classical education was a model for other noble families of the time.

Adding to the effects of More's leadership was the fact that Catherine of Aragon (1485 - 1536), daughter of Isabella and Ferdinand of Spain and first wife of Henry VIII of England, was very much in favor of humanism and had close contact with outstanding humanists. She inspired Erasmus to write his On Christian Matrimony, one of the works strongly supportive of education for women and brought Juan Vives to the English court to be in charge of her daughter Mary Tudor's education. Vives' treatise, The Instruction of a Christian Woman (1523), dedicated to Catherine, was perhaps the foremost work on women's education in 16th century Europe, with great influence in England (Stock, p.51). Another eminent humanist, Roger Ascham (1515 - 1568) was tutor to Princess Elizabeth and then Latin secretary to her cousin, Mary of Scotland.

Thus, by the year 1540, the idea of a broad classical education, moving beyond the religious focus of the past, had become accepted for the upperclass women, and through most of the century many such women did indeed become learned. By 1540, too, a new major force entered the picture--the Protestant Reformation--and set the stage for subsequent changes in the education of women.

The Protestant Reformation

The key humanists, including Erasmus and More, had espoused their liberal philosophies within the framework of the existing Catholic church. More himself was executed for refusing to choose king above pope. While they did not themselves reject orthodox Catholicism, however, the early humanists were responsible for an immense amount of intellectual curiosity and inquiry as well as for the growth of the universities that helped such inquiry flourish, all of which led to what has been called "the slow but inexorable erosion of traditional religious authority and orthodoxy." (Gwynne-Thomas, p. 68)

The most dramatic consequence of that erosion was the Protestant Reformation that began in 1517 when Martin Luther, (1483-1546) a teacher at the University of Wittenberg in Germany, became the leader of the movement to cast off the authority of Rome. Luther inspired other Reformation leadere and led to the establishment of a host of Protestant denominations and sects. Those new Protestant groups had doctrines that differed from each other in many respects, but had some features in common. For one, they shared the ideal of using the everyday vernacular language instead of Latin in the religious services and of calling upon all members to study the Scriptures in that vernacular, as the early humanists had urged. This meant that direct contact with the Scriptures was not to be limited to the clergy and to upper-class scholars who could read and understand Latin but was to be available to anyone who learned the rudiments of reading.

On the question of women's education, however, the Protestant groups and their leaders varied. John Knox, (?1505-1572), for example, the founder of Scottish Presbytarianism, took a vehemently anti-female stance in his treatise, The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women (?1558). Yet, Luther himself, was very supportive of women's education, insisting on compulsory schooling for all boys and all girls, on secondary as well as on primary levels. There are also many statements in his writings in which he advocates advanced education for qualified girls as well as boys. Luther also noted the need for female teachers (Green, p. 97). Those ideals regarding women's education took hold in the Germanic regions of continental Europe to an extraordinary degree, with the establishment of many schools that girls attended and a solid acceptance of female education.

The English Reformation

In England, Protestantism started in 1534, when Henry VIII established the Church of England after Pope Clement VII excommunicated him for marrying Anne Boleyn without receiving a papal divorce from Catherine of Aragon. Henry declared himself the head of the new church, dissolved the convents and monasteries, and confiscated for the king and state all of the former church's properties. As a result, the convent and other church and monastic schools were closed and most of them never reopened.

To take their place, a great number of privately endowed schools arose throughout England, well-subsidized by the members of newly-rich mercantile classes who focused on endowing grammar schools, rather than on the universities that philanthropists of the early humanists had subsidized. So many grammar schools meant that there were even more petty schools and other sources of primary education. Furthermore, many teachers were needed to teach in all those schools and, indeed, in the latter part of the 16th century (as well as on into the 17th century), England was replete with well-educated, scholarly schoolmasters, many of who replaced less well-educated local clergy and other teachers left over from the generation before.

Women's Education in the Sixteenth Century

Henry VIII was succeeded by his daughter, Elizabeth 1 (1533-1603), whose learning both reflected and fostered the scholarly values of the humanists as well as of the early Protestant reformers. By the latter part of the 16th century, the impacts of humanism, Protestantism, and Elizabeth's reign had coalesced. The view of the time on women's education include those expressed by Richard Mulcaster.

Mulcaster (c. 1532 - 1611) was perhaps the most influential of a group of schoolmasters/spelling reformers of the Elizabethan era, and he had an immeasurable effect on reading and spelling in England and America (Balmuth, p. 126). On the question of female education, Mulcaster's position was consonant with the climate of the late 16th century, although he went somewhat further than his contemporaries in advocating formal education for more than just upperclass women.

In a chapter entitled "Education of Girls" in his book Positions (1581) Mulcaster makes this case for educating girls: "Our country doth allow it; our duty doth enforce it; their aptness calls for it; their excellency commands it" (DeMolen, pp. 125 - 126). Yet, though he obviously felt that women were capable of acquiring learning, Mulcaster also cautioned that a woman's being learned could not override the practical effects of her being of a low social status, e.g., there was little chance of her marrying upward (DeMolen, p. 140 - 141).

The fact that Mulcaster's monarch was a learned woman, Elizabeth, assuredly helped the cause of advanced education for women, as reflected in this statement by Mulcaster: "That young maidens can learn, nature doth give them, and that they have learned our experience doth teach us;...what foreign example can more assure the world than our diamond at home; . . . if no

example did confirm it that young maidens deserve the training, this is our own mirror, the majesty of her sex, doth prove it in her own person, and commends it to our reason. We have besides her highness, as undershining stars, many singular ladies and gentlewomen." (DeMolen, p. 133).

The Influence of Puritanism

The newer teachers and the members of the new education-supporting classes mentioned above--associated with the prolific establishment of schools--often were Puritans, opposed to the Church of England. Many of them were followers of John Knox, who was himself a disciple of John Calvin. Calvin (1509 - 1564) preached a severely austere morality, and in Geneva, Switzerland, where he had his headquarters in mid 16th century, was able to establish an organized, highly effective system of enforcing morality by means of a group of elected members of the church who had power of life and death over transgressors. (This model was later to appear in the early English settlements in America.)

On the question of education, Calvin and Knox, as well as Luther were all influenced by the humanists' great emphasis on learning. The humanists had been elitist, however, concerned with the education of the ruling classes in order to help them rule well. The Protestant reformers were populist in

their thinking and extended the humanists' emphasis on education to all classes of the population (Green, pp. 96- 97), with the goal of each individual's learning to live a better life rather than of leaders learning how to improve society for all. This view, acted upon by the Puritans as well as by other Protestant groups accounts for much of the intense activity in establishing schools which were perceived as supplements to the home (Cremin, p. 122).

Effects of Puritanism on Women's Education

Having so much of the grass roots schooling of the latter half of the 16th century in the hands of the Puritans had powerful effects in England (as well as in the American settlements, where Calvinism flourished).

One effect was the dissemination of Protestant values, which led ultimately to a new family structure, one where the wife was a help meet to her husband, with circumscribed duties. This prescriptive family, headed by an authoritarian husband/father, served a religious need: The Catholic practice of group worship centered in the church was replaced by the ideal of each family household becoming a center for worship, with daily services, Scripture reading, and other practices that depended upon a clearly defined family model with responsibility for education as well as religion. In the realization of that model, the aspirations of the initial humanists and Protestant reformers

regarding women's education were changed and in the changing, became intellectually lower. In contrast not only to the stated liberalism of the previous century but to the practices of many of the years prior to the 17th century, more and more limitations were placed on all women. The Elizabethan ideal of a rich classical education for upperclass women was supplanted by one that was broader but called for much less erudition, an ideal of women of all classes becoming literate enough to read the Bible for themselves and perhaps to teach it to the children and servants of the household--but not much more. For high-born women, the prevailing ideal was more secular, and included the graces required of a socially accomplished wife--the Cavalier values of the 17th century left their mark in this respect.

In practice, the formal schooling actually available to females barely reflected any of those ideals. For those who were too poor to hope to preside over a domestic domain, there was practically no provision. For middle classes, there is little data on the extent of primary school education for girls, though the picture that emerges is one of very limited resources. On the secondary level, girls were rarely permitted into the grammar schools, nor were they sent as often as boys even when they might have been welcome. Thus, the Quakers, who believed

in female education, only provided two female and two coeducational boarding schools out of a total of fifteen that they had established by 1671 (Stock, p. 70). There were some female boarding schools for a limited number of the well-to-do, but their curricula, with rare exceptions, were aimed at developing socially acceptable rather than learned women. For women's higher education, the possibilities were even more closed off. Dissolving the convents had eliminated those institutions as sites for any kind of women's scholarly advancement; nor were women permitted into the secular centers of higher learning--the universities.

How women reacted to such limitation of opportunity is a natural question, one that might have been asked for earlier eras as well. The answer for the 16th century is equivocal: On the one hand, women in general believed that a women's social life, as well as her morality could be endangered by too much learning. Yet, there are indications that such caution did not mean that women considered themselves innately inferior. In Elizabeth Jocelyn's treatise, The Mothers Legacie, to her unborne Childe (1624), she hints at an inner pride covered over with self-protective diffidence: "I desire (if the child be a daughter) her bringing up may be learning the Bible, as my sisters do, good housewifery, writing and good works: other learning a woman needs not: though I admire it in those whom God hath blest with dis-

cretion. . . . But where learning and wisdom meet in a virtuous disposed woman, she is the fittest closet for all goodness. She is like a well-balanced ship that may bear all her sail. She is--indeed, I should but shame myself, if I should go about to praise her more." (Watson, 1906, p. 118).

The picture, then, that emerges of female education in 17th century England is, on the whole, rather dismal. Nevertheless, as was noted at the start, that century also helped set the stage for the education of succeeding years. Although it is beyond the province of this paper to detail the ways that the 17th century had impact on later years, it may be said that, from the very start of the 18th century, certain aspects of the educational picture began to brighten for women, helping to set into motion a series of processes that resulted ultimately though laboriously in the much more cheerful image presented by the English female education of today.

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